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ABSTRACT

This article on language instruction elaborates on assumptions, procedures, and techniques used in the implementation of various teaching methodologies. Equally critical of the grammar-translation method and the direct method, the author points out the strengths of the audiolingual approach. The lack of controlled, scientific investigation of the nature of language learning is deplored in an attack on the methodologies which appear merely to be passing fads. (RL)

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# FROM GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION TO DIRECT TO AUDIOLINGUAL TO WHAT?

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(What follows is not a formal paper but the text of an informal talk that was given at the Conference in order to encourage discussion about various aspects of foreign language teaching. The text has been slightly revised. The footnotes contain information and comments not given at the Conference.)

Although many ideas in foreign language methodology have existed, with various degrees of preponderance, for many centuries,[1] the last one hundred years or so have seen the introduction or re-introduction of many ideas as well as considerable -- and at times, rapid -- changes in this professional field.

Before going into some detail about these ideas and changes, let's stop and think for a moment about the concept of method in general, as well as about the way a method is related to assumptions, procedures, and techniques.[2] A method is the result of certain assumptions, mainly about the nature of the matter involved, the purposes or goals of the process and the nature of the process involved. A method is implemented by means of a set of procedures, which are method-wide ways of doing things. The procedures are in turn implemented by different persons according to different individual techniques. The discussion on foreign language teaching methodology that follows will, therefore, emphasize the assumptions on which each method is based and the procedures used in its implementation.

For many years before the reaction of the late 1800's and early 1900's, foreign languages were mostly taught -- and are still taught, in some schools -- by a method based on the following assumptions: (1) that language is primarily and basically graphic -- an assumption that resulted from many centuries of Latin studies --; (2) that the main purpose of foreign language study is either the acquisition of a tool for literary research or the development of the learner's logical power -- the latter leading to such oddities as the requirement that students should take "either mathematics or a foreign language" (as if the two subjects were even remotely related!); and (3) that the process of foreign language learning is deductive.

These are the assumptiosn from which the traditional grammar-translation method was derived. Its procedures are as follows:

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-- The language skills given importance from the beginning are reading and writing, with listening and speaking taught, if at all, in advanced stages of the program (a common result of this being the language major who can read but cannot communicate in the language).

-- Pronunciation, if referred to at all, is referred to on the basis of spelling and native language sounds (e.g., "'a' is pronounced as in 'father'"), and advanced pronunciation courses may be offered (something that makes very little sense, since by the time a student registers in such a course his pronunciation habits -- hhwethairr gooooth orr ƀahth -- hhahƀ lone bein' estahƀleess[3]).

-- Grammar is taught through the memorization of rules, which are then applied deductively and practiced in translation exercises (these memorization and passive procedures usually mean that the learner, when asked in a conversation something like "Quand partez-vous?", must think "Quand...? quand...? -- oh, yes, when--; partez? -- hmm, that must be from partir--; now, let's see: je pars, tu pars, il part, nous partons, vous partez... -- that's right, nous partons--; O.K., the French word for tomorrow is...," etc., by which time the person that asked the question is starting the second set of a tennis match on the other side of town).

-- Vocabulary is emphasized from the beginning and is taught by means of foreign language-native language word lists (which lead to the production of many incorrect, and sometimes unintelligible, sentences).

-- The native language is used almost exclusively and is the door to the foreign language; emphasis is given to similarities between the foreign language and the native language.

Since the activity stressed in this method is the translation of texts through the application of logic, if we must summarize the nature of this method in one word we would have to refer to it as an intellectualization of the foreign language learning process. The strict application of this method results in an overt understanding of the structure of the written language but in very little habit formation.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's there was a reaction, which began in Europe, against the grammar-translation method. This reaction was based on the assumptions that (1) language is both oral and graphic, (2) the main purspoe of second language acquisition is communication, and (3) the process of foreign language learning must be inductive, without any need for rules and particularly without reference to the native language of the learner.

These assumptions resulted in the direct method, with the following procedures:

-- Listening and speaking are the skills stressed, but reading and writing are presented with them (in North America, however, the short

duration of language programs and the lack of contact with speakers of foreign languages meant that, beginning in the late 20's and early 30's, the direct method came to be used primarily to teach reading).

-- Pronunciation is "taught" by imitation only, without explanations or drills and usually without the aid of a transcription.[5]

-- Grammar is "taught" without rules, explanations or drills, and without a definite order of presentation -- that is, in a purely inductive manner.

-- Vocabulary is emphasized from the beginning and an attempt is made to convey the meaning of words without reference to the native language -- that is, through the use of objects, pictures, and actions.[6]

-- The use of the native language, by either the teacher or the students, is expressly forbidden.[7]

It should be noted that some of the extreme procedures that became dogmas of the direct method -- such as "never use the native language," "do not give explanations," and the idea that there is no need for a structural order of presentation -- were not advocated by famous early proponents of reform such as Viëtor. What took place was a rather extreme reaction that went far beyond their call for reform.

The primary activity in the direct method has been conversation (and later, reading) in a "cultural island," restricted by the three "noes" -- no use of the native language, no explanations, and no need for a structural order. But, who learns a language without any reference, conscious or unconscious, to another language? A child learning his native tongue. And who learns a language in a purely inductive way, without explanations, drills, or a predetermined order? An infant learning his native tongue. So, since the direct method deals with the foreign language learner mostly as if he were an infant learning his native tongue, if we are to describe the direct method in one word, we would have to say that it is -- well, having come this far without incident I might as well say it -- an infantilization of the foreign language learning process. It can result in habit formation; but, due to the fact that there is no overt structural understanding and no systematic drill work, habits are formed very slowly and inefficiently.[8]

Note that the grammar-translation method and the direct method represent, in terms of the foreign language learning process, the two extremes of the spectrum which are, respectively, reliance on total deduction versus reliance on total induction.

During World War II there was an urgent need to impart foreign language communication skills to a large number of government personnel. The grammar-translation method didn't seem to result in fluency. The direct method could impart communication skills, but much too slowly.

A new approach was given, in the United States, to a group of structural linguists under the aegis of the American Council of Learned Societies. These scientific linguists worked under the assumptions that (1) language is primarily and basically oral and secondarily graphic, (2) the main purpose of foreign language learning is communication, and (3) foreign language learning is more efficient if the process is both inductive and deductive and is based on the contrasts between the specific languae to be learned and the specific language of the learner.

Although linguistics is the science of language, not of language teaching, and although these structural linguists have been reluctant to say that they developed a "method" and refer, at most, to a "linguistic approach," it seems obvious that when a group of people develop, as they did, similar new teaching materials for dozens of languages and these materials -- when used under their supervision -- are used similarly, a method has been developed. For lack of a better term, I shall call this method the structural linguists' method. Its procedures, which have evolved considerably since World War II, are as follows:

-- The oral skills are stressed throughout, with the graphic skills accompanying them or, in some cases, being delayed until an oral foundation has been established. (Contrary to widespread rumor, this doesn't necessarily result in "fluent illiterates.")

-- Pronunciation is taught by means of oral drills, with explanations as needed (except that simple mimicry techniques are used by linguistically untrained informants),[9] and transcription is used as an aid to prounnunciation.

-- Grammar is taught by a combination of induction and deduction -- that is, by means of oral grammatical pattern drills, with explanations as needed (except that "summaries of behavior" are given at the end of each pattern drill section in order to deter linguistically untrained informants from giving grammatical explanations and in order to make correct grammatical explanations available to their students).

-- Vocabulary is not emphasized early in the program and is taught in linguistic context -- that is, within sentences -- with native language sentence equivalences; sentence variation drills are used in order to develop awareness of word boundaries and functions, and lexical expansion drills may also be used.

-- The native language is used as little as possible but as much as necessary -- it is used, for example, in glosses and explanations --; the native language is not, however, the door to the foreign language. Emphasis is given to differences rather than similarities between the two languages.

The activities stressed in the structural linguists' method are the learning of sentence patterns and lexical items in dialogues, the performance of prounnunciation, sentence variation, and grammatical pattern

drills, and, in various degrees, conversation. It is difficult to characterize this method in one or even a few words. The term "mim-mem" has been used, mostly in a derogatory manner; but this term is unfair, since the mimicry-memorization technique was developed primarily because of the need to use linguistically untrained informants as instructors and thus the term refers to what the students do under the direction of only one of the members of the linguist-informant teams. In a number of ways, however, this method seems to be balanced -- it is, for example more or less in the center of the deduction-induction spectrum and far from the extremes on the question of how much use should be made of the native language. This method can also be called scientific, since its teaching materials are prepared and presented on the basis of a careful contrastive analysis of the two languages involved and of drill work on the points of interference. So even though this may be interpreted as showing my personal bias, may I call this method balanced and scientific?

Habit formation with overt structural understanding of both the oral and the written language is usually an outcome of this method. Fluency in the use of the language, however, is a variable that depends on how well the instructor has built the bridge between mechanical language work (such as the memorization of dialogues and the performance of pattern drills) and the free use of the language. Sentence variation drills, recombined oral materials, and graded conversation stimuli are some of the building blocks of that bridge that the learner must cross in order to become fluent in the language. Unfortunately, very few teaching materials provide this essential practice; most leave it up to the teacher -- and if the teacher doesn't build this important bridge, the result can be good memorization of dialogues and good performance within the limitations of each pattern drill, but pitifully little fluency in the language.

During the late 50's a group of language teachers, most of them direct methodologists, adopted, to various extents, some of the procedures used by the structural linguists, and these various combinations of direct and linguistic methodology came to be known as a new method. With respect to its assumptions, (1) some of its proponents considered language as being primarily and basically oral, while others thought of language as being both (and about equally) oral and graphic; (2) the main purpose of language learning was assumed to be communication; and (3) most proponents of this method assumed that foreign language learning is primarily inductive. (It is evident that the first two assumptions just mentioned represent a combination of ideas of direct methodologists and structural linguists, while the third one has been strongly influenced by direct methodology.) This is the combination of basic ideas behind the audiolingual method.

When it comes to procedures, the audiolingual method shows, again, that it has been influenced more strongly by direct methodology than by linguistics:

-- Some proponents of this method think that the oral skills should precede the graphic skills, while others think that reading and

writing should be taught together with listening and speaking.

-- Pronunciation is "taught" primarily or exclusively by imitation.

-- Grammar is taught primarily by induction, with oral pattern drills, and either without explanations or with "summaries of behavior."[10]

-- Vocabulary is not emphasized early and is taught in linguistic context, with native language sentence equivalents appearing somewhere in the materials but usually avoided in class.

-- The native language is almost not used.

The activities stressed by this method are dialogues and pattern drills, with, in various degress, conversation, usually in a "cultural island." Depending on the procedures used -- which vary considerably, to the point where one could speak of several "schools" of audiolingualists --, this method may or may not result in habit formation, with or without overt structural understanding, and fluency in the language may or may not be attained by the learner.

When it comes, however, to giving a brief description of the audiolingual method, I am unable to come up with anything better than a question mark. First, because just about <u>anything</u> is being done nowadays under the banner of audiolingualism -- the moment the term "audiolingual" came in vogue, for example, some very traditional grammar-translation textbooks became "audiolingual," almost overnight, by the simple device of making a few bad tape recordings available! Second, I can only use a question mark because the audiolingual method is a combination of ideas from direct methodologists and structural linguists, and this is, in itself, a serious contradiction. In fact, some audiolingual teaching has so little linguistics in it that it reminds me of Nancy's lemonades. You know, Nancy, the comic strip character. She ties a slice of lemon with a string and dips it once in a glass of water and that's three-cent lemonade; two dips make it five-cent lemonade. Some audiolingual teaching makes so little use of linguistic knowledge that it may be one-cent lemonade -- that is, I suppose, what you get when you touch the <u>outside</u> of the glass with the slice of lemon.

The methods just described represent, respectively, the two extremes of the methodological spectrum, its approximate center, and a variable range between the inductive extreme and the center. There have been, of course, many combinations of these basic assumptions and procedures, so that foreign language teaching can be said to have taken place at just about any point in this spectrum.

What is really sad, what makes one wonder if we have the right to call our occupation a <u>profession</u>, is the fact that none of these methodological changes and none of the various methodological combinations from one end to the other of this spectrum have been backed up by a single

carefully-controlled long-range experiment. Delattre's[11] was subjective. Agard and Dunkel's[12] was a survey, with the lack of controls that this implies. Scherer and Wertheimer's[13] lasted really only one year and even within that year there were several important shortcomings. The Pennsylvania Research Project[14] involved 58 schools and 104 teachers, which means it was another survey with few controls. And so on, ad nauseam. So people continue to say, as they have for a long time, "After several years of foreign language study the students know about the same, regardless of the method used." Do they? Who knows? No carefully-controlled experimental research that could give us the answer has been carried out.

Moreover, even in the few limited areas in which we have good empirical evidence, this evidence may be disregarded by the leaders in the field of language teaching. For instance, there are statements from literally dozens of linguists, and at least six careful experiments, that prove that if the graphic skills are taught with the oral skills the result is poorer oral production. But what is the latest trend in foreign language teaching? It is to teach all four skills together, because "they reinforce each other"! Other trends that either contradict empirical evidence or have no evidence in their favor are: (1) teaching first the passive skills, then the active skills; (2) not correcting the student's errors nor asking for his individual repsonse because this is terribly embarrassing to him and will therefore result in less or worse language learning -- this is, incidentally, one of the major recent contributions of psychology to foreign language teaching--; (3) teaching grammar on the basis of abstract "deep structure" rather than concrete "surface structures;" (4) devoting much more time to the so-called "learning" or "presentation" or "introductory" pattern drills than to the so-called "testing" or "verification" or "practice" drills (we don't even know, after twenty-five years of using pattern drills, which types of drills produce the most learning in the shortest time); etc.

The problem is that as long as we fail to conduct careful experimentation we shall be condemned to go on skipping from fad to fad to fad, each new fad to be created by the persons with the most direct lines to, or the loudest voices in, the editorial and sales offices of publishers in the Eastern United States (like, for instance, those of Haircut, Race & Whirl, Plenty Is All, Hat on Muffin, and so forth).

In view of the rather grim picture just described, if we are going to have in the next twenty-five years the same unscientific attitudes that we have had during the last twenty-five years, the title of this talk should obviously be changed to "From Grammar-Translation to Direct to Audiolingual to H---!" Since we are all adults here, I shall be more explicit. This four-letter word is h-o-p-e. Hope that in countries as large and great and rich as Canada and the United States there will be at least one educational institution and one government agency or foundation willing to support a series of carefully controlled experiments in foreign language teaching over a period of six to eight years. That is probably all the time we need in order to find the answers to most of the questions that we have been pondering and arguing about for

many, many years. That is the only way in which it will be possible to re-define and improve foreign language teaching so that it will have a scientific basis. That is also the only way in which we will be able to develop a method, aduiolingual or wahtever it may then be called, that will produce fluent, accurate speakers of a foreign language in the shortest possible time.

## NOTES

1. For a long-range historical view of foreign language teaching see L.G. Kelly, 25 Centuries of Language Teaching (Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1969).

2. A discussion of two of these terms appears in Edward M. Anthony, "Approach, Method, and Technique," English Language Teaching, Vol. XVII, pp. 63-67; reprinted in Harold B. Allen (ed.), Teaching English as a Second Language (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), pp. 93-97.

3. That is, "--whether good or bad -- have long been established." That unusual spelling is just an attempt to show how I pronounced the English language after more than five years of well-motivated grammar-translation study in South America; if I pronounce it better now it is only because I learned English all over again when I arrived in the United States.

4. The word "taught" has quotation marks, both in this paragraph and the next one, because it seems to me that simply exposing the learner to the foreign language, without order or system, can hardly be called "teaching;" if we call this "teaching," then we would also have to say that parents and siblings "teach" a young child his native tongue -- but do they?

5. The popularization of the direct method coincided with the development of the International Phonetic Alphabet, and a number of direct methodologists did use it; but so did many traditionalists, electics, etc., to the point that people talked of a "Phonetic Method." It would be an error, therefore, to say that the use of a transcription is a characteristic of the direct method.

6. Whether this attempt succeeds or not in keeping the learner from "thinking" in the native language is something that has never been determined; for all we know, the learner may very well, at some point, make foreign language-native language equations in his mind, equations which, if incorrect, cannot be corrected by the teacher.

7. A strict application of this negative injunction can create very

frustrating situations for both the teacher and the students. What does a student feel when he doesn't understand what is being done in a Spanish class, asks for an explanation, and the teacher replies -- alas! -- in Spanish? What does he feel when he misunderstands the nature of a homework assignment because it was announced in Spanish?

8. Although "direct" in the sense that it attempts to connect reality with language expression without the mediation of the native language, the direct method is quite indirect in the sense that it doesn't take advantage of a number of shortcuts available in the foreign language learning process (such as, to mention one shortcut, the ability of the learner to see and verbalize patterns).

9. In this method, teaching is done by a team composed of a "native informant" and a person academically trained in linguistics. The native informant is simply an educated native speaker of the language being taught (i.e., he doesn't have to have any academic training in linguistics or language teaching), and his function is to serve as a linguistic model, pattern drill master, and conversation leader for a small group of students. The function of the academically-trained linguist is to follow the progress of several small groups of students and visit their classes, at frequent intervals, in order to give these students explanations of the structure of the language as they may need them.

10. The use of "summaries of behavior" in audiolingual materials seems to imply that academically-trained language teachers are as unable to give correct grammatical explanations as untrained native speakers, an implication that is probably false in the case of most language teachers. It looks as if many audiolingualists have not accepted the idea that the language teacher must perform the functions of both members of the linguist-native informant teams used in the structural linguists' method.

11. Pierre Delattre, "A Technique of Aural-Oral Approach," French Review, Vol. XX (January 1947), pp. 238-250.

12. Frederick B. Agard and H.B. Dunkel, An Investigation of Second-Language Teaching (Bonston: Ginn, 1948).

13. George A.C. Scherer and Michael Wertheimer, A Psycholinguistic Experiment in Foreign-Language Teaching (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

14. See Foreign Language Annals, Vol. III, No. 2 (December 1969) for a bibliography -- pp. 180-181 -- and three articles -- pp. 194-236 -- on the Penssylvania Research Project.